

2026 National 4-H Leadership Meeting Report

San Antonio, TX

February 23-25, 2026

Beyond Ready

2026 National 4-H Leadership Meeting

Westin San Antonio Riverwalk, San Antonio, TX



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Executive Summary

The 2026 National 4-H Leadership Meeting, held February 23–25 in San Antonio, Texas, convened 4-H program leaders, Extension professionals, foundation executives, and national partners from across the Cooperative Extension System to advance the shared work of preparing young people to be Beyond Ready for life and work.

Building on the foundation established during the first year of the Beyond Ready initiative, the 2026 meeting focused on implementation, mobilization, and leadership capacity across the national 4-H network. Participants engaged in collaborative sessions to strengthen system alignment, explore emerging workforce opportunities for youth, and identify practical strategies to expand the reach and impact of 4-H programs.

Throughout the three-day convening, discussions centered on how the Cooperative Extension System can continue to evolve to meet the needs of young people navigating a rapidly changing world of learning and work. Participants examined emerging technologies, new workforce pathways, and strategies for mobilizing partners and resources in support of the initiative's long-term goal of reaching 10 million youth annually by 2030.

Key Discussions & Outcomes

Advancing Implementation & System Alignment

Participants reflected on progress made during the first year of the Beyond Ready initiative and identified actions needed to support continued implementation across Land-Grant Universities (LGU).

- Program leaders emphasized the importance of aligning Beyond Ready efforts with institutional priorities and statewide strategies.
- The introduction of the Beyond Ready Program Leadership Academy highlighted a commitment to strengthening leadership capacity through peer learning and applied practice.
- Discussions reinforced the need for consistent data collection, shared metrics, and clear reporting processes to track progress toward national goals.



Responding to a Changing Workforce & Learning Landscape

Across sessions, participants explored how shifts in education and workforce expectations are shaping youth development priorities.

- Leaders examined the growing importance of flexible learning pathways that combine technical skills and human-centered competencies.
- Emerging models highlighted opportunities to connect youth with career pathways in agriculture, skilled trades, and other high-demand industries.
- There was increased interest in credentialing, work-based learning, and partnerships that connect 4-H experiences to real-world opportunities.

Leveraging Innovation, Partnerships, and Technology

Participants explored strategies to expand program reach and improve efficiency through innovation and collaboration.

- Generative AI was identified as a tool to enhance program delivery, communications, fundraising, and administrative efficiency, but it requires clear guidance on ethics, data privacy, and youth use.
- Leaders discussed strategies to strengthen partnerships with industry, schools, and community organizations to expand access and scale impact.
- Alumni engagement and national “tentpole moments” were identified as key opportunities to mobilize the broader 4-H network and increase visibility.

Strengthening Storytelling, Fundraising, and Network Mobilization

The meeting reinforced the importance of clearly communicating 4-H’s value and aligning resources to support growth.

- Participants highlighted the need for stronger, more consistent storytelling that connects youth outcomes to workforce readiness and community impact.
- Fundraising discussions emphasized the importance of aligning donor interests with program priorities and building long-term, sustainable funding strategies.
- Leaders identified opportunities to activate alums, volunteers, and partners better to expand both reach and capacity.



Preparing for Next Steps

Participants identified several priorities to guide continued progress across the 4-H system:

- Advance Beyond Ready implementation by strengthening alignment across LGUs, including leadership engagement and staff capacity-building.
- Expand workforce-aligned programming, including credentialing exploration, career pathway development, and industry partnerships.
- Improve data systems and storytelling tools to communicate impact and support stakeholder engagement better.
- Strengthen fundraising strategies and development capacity to support long-term growth.
- Continue building national and regional collaboration through shared resources, peer learning, and leadership development opportunities.

Key Themes from the Meeting

Emerging Technology and AI in 4-H Programs

Participants identified artificial intelligence as an increasingly integrated tool across 4-H programming, communications, and operations.

- Leaders are already using AI to support content development, data analysis, and administrative efficiency.
- There is a growing need for AI literacy among staff and youth to ensure responsible and effective use of AI.
- Ongoing discussions emphasized the importance of establishing clear guardrails related to ethics, data privacy, and youth safety.



Evolving Workforce and Education Pathways

Discussions reinforced that youth are navigating a rapidly shifting education and workforce landscape, requiring new approaches to readiness.

- Leaders highlighted the importance of combining technical skills with human-centered competencies such as communication, adaptability, and teamwork.
- There is increasing interest in work-based learning, credentialing, and career-connected experiences.
- 4-H is well-positioned to help youth explore diverse pathways, including agriculture, skilled trades, and emerging industries.

Advancing the Beyond Ready Initiative

Participants focused on strengthening the implementation of the Beyond Ready initiative across the national 4-H system.

- Leaders shared progress from Year 1 and identified opportunities to better align efforts across LGUs.
- The Beyond Ready Program Leadership Academy was introduced as a key strategy to build leadership capacity and support implementation.
- Continued emphasis was placed on defining measurable outcomes and aligning efforts with national growth goals.

Innovative Workforce-Aligned Program Models

Sessions highlighted scalable program models that connect youth to real-world career pathways through experiential learning.

- Examples included programs in agriculture, culinary arts, forestry, and technology that integrate hands-on learning with career exploration.
- Successful models emphasized partnerships with industry, schools, and community organizations.



- These approaches demonstrate how 4-H programs can create clear pathways from youth interests to workforce opportunities.

Communicating Impact and Mobilizing the 4-H Network

Participants emphasized the importance of strengthening how 4-H communicates its value and activates its network.

- Leaders discussed opportunities to align messaging across states better and elevate national storytelling efforts.
- The National 4-H Index Study was highlighted as a key tool for demonstrating impact and supporting public value messaging.
- National “tentpole moments” and alumni engagement were identified as opportunities to increase visibility and participation.

Collaboration and System Alignment

The meeting reinforced the importance of collaboration across the Cooperative Extension System.

- Participants engaged in regional discussions and peer learning to share strategies and address common challenges.
- Leaders identified opportunities to strengthen partnerships, align priorities, and improve coordination across the network.
- Continued collaboration will be critical to scaling impact and achieving long-term growth goals.

Meeting Overview

The 2026 National 4-H Leadership Meeting focused on advancing implementation of the Beyond Ready initiative, strengthening system alignment, and identifying strategies to expand the reach and impact of 4-H programs.



Through collaborative sessions and peer learning, the meeting emphasized leadership development, workforce readiness, and approaches to scale programming across the Cooperative Extension System.

Meeting Objectives

- Advance implementation of LGU Beyond Ready action plans and growth strategies
- Strengthen leadership capacity through the launch of the 4-H Beyond Ready Program Leadership Academy
- Identify measurable progress indicators and reporting processes for the Beyond Ready initiative and national KPIs
- Share scalable program models connecting youth to workforce pathways, skilled trades, and emerging career opportunities
- Explore strategies to leverage emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, to enhance 4-H programming, communications, and operations
- Strengthen collaboration across LGUs through peer learning, regional planning, and leadership networking
- Identify strategies to mobilize alumni, volunteers, and partners to expand the reach and impact of 4-H
- Advance storytelling and fundraising strategies that communicate the public value of 4-H and support growth toward the Beyond Ready Bold Goal of reaching 10 million youth by 2030.

Participants

Participants included 4-H Program Leaders and 4-H Foundation Executives from LGUs, along with representatives from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and staff from the National 4-H Council.

This cross-system group brought together program, partnership, and development perspectives to support alignment and implementation of the Beyond Ready initiative.

Meeting Resources

- Full Agenda
- Session Slides by day:
    - Monday



    - Tuesday
    - Wednesday
- Forms and handouts are linked in their respective sessions
    - Tuesday form
    - Wednesday form



Day 1 Highlights | Monday, February 23, 2026

Enhancing 4-H Reach & Resources through AI

Session Overview

This session focused on increasing awareness and practical understanding of generative AI tools and their potential applications across 4-H youth development, communications, fundraising, and strategic operations. Participants explored current use cases, governance considerations, and engaged in hands-on prompt development activities.

Facilitators:

- Alexa Groff, National 4-H AI Specialist, Iowa State University
- Rachel Haselby, Computer Science and AI Specialist, Purdue University
- Mark Light, 4-H STEM Specialist, North Carolina A&T University
- Rukeia Draw, Ph.D., Executive Director, ECOP 4-H Leadership Committee and 4-H PLWG

Participant Discussion: "How are you already using AI in your professional life?"

Responses are grouped into key themes:

Efficiency & Administrative Support

Several participants described AI as "like a calculator," making it easier to be more advanced. Noting that, "like electricity and the internet, there will always be people who are cautious of it, but we should not avoid it because it is here to stay."

Participants also noted that AI tools are increasingly built into existing systems, which helps reduce the need to repeatedly explain what 4-H and Extension are when creating communications or reports.

Participants described using AI to:



- Draft emails, proposals, evaluations, and social media content
- Rewrite messages to “change my tone to make it sound better for the reader.”
- Summarize large documents, such as “taking a 150-page investment statement into a summary.”
- Organize thoughts for large projects
- Respond to repetitive communications more quickly by copying and pasting emails into AI to draft responses.

Communication & Translation

Several participants noted that AI can help translate complex information into formats that are easier for audiences to understand.

Participants reported using AI to:

- “Crafting emails and making things easier to understand, especially jargon.”
- Translating technical or fundraising language into plain language
- Adjusting tone for different audiences such as youth, legislators, donors, and internal teams
- Editing language to be more professional or less harsh
- Using AI tools to help reduce bias when reviewing applications

Program & Curriculum Development

Participants discussed the need to guide youth in responsible use. One participant shared that they allow youth to use AI in projects but require them to document the prompts used and how the tool supported their work.

Others emphasized that the goal is to teach youth “not to cheat with it but use it to make informed decisions and guide us through the work.”

Examples shared included:

- Connecting AI learning to agriculture and other state industries
- Integrating AI into robotics, photography, and STEM contests
- Supporting curriculum development and review
- Designing youth challenges that intentionally incorporate AI
- Exploring AI connections to agriculture and other state industries



- The 4-H AI Challenge and Ag AI Challenge were referenced as examples of youth-centered, problem-based learning models.

Data, Finance & Analysis

Participants shared examples of using AI to support analysis and impact storytelling.

Participants also raised questions about whether AI could help identify youth at risk of disengaging from programs. This prompted discussion about privacy protections and the need for secure internal systems.

Participants shared examples of using AI to:

- Analyze survey and participation data
- Support impact storytelling
- Map donor data where CRM systems lack features
- Summarize financial or operational documents

Governance, Risk & Ethics Discussion

Participants raised several considerations about responsible AI use.

They discussed considerations related to:

- AI-altered or distorted images of youth
- AI use in record books and scholarship applications
- Disclosure requirements in competitions
- AI-generated misinformation or hallucinated citations
- Comment moderation on digital platforms
- Alignment with university IT and legal policies
- Ensuring youth data and personally identifiable information are protected
- Equity implications for youth without reliable internet access

One state example included requiring youth to submit the AI tool used, the prompts entered, and the date of use for competitions.

Participants emphasized the importance of clear guardrails and transparency when using AI with young people rather than full prohibition.



Key Takeaways

- AI is already being used across LGUs for communication, administration, curriculum development, fundraising, and data analysis.
- Participants expressed interest in continued AI literacy training for staff and youth.
- Governance, disclosure standards, and data privacy were recurring discussion points.
- Many view AI as a tool that can enhance efficiency while requiring human oversight.
- Equity and access considerations remain important as AI integration expands.
- Participants identified small, practical next steps to begin or expand responsible AI implementation.

Leading 4-H Forward – A Mentorship Workshop for New & Aspiring State Program Leaders

Session Overview

“Leading 4-H Forward” was designed as a panel discussion and mentorship workshop for current and emerging state 4-H program leaders. The session combined structured panel questions, participant-driven discussion, and real-time survey feedback. Focus areas included strategic thinking, workplace culture, succession planning, advancement partnerships, communication with university leadership, and leadership competencies for the state program leader pipeline.

Participant feedback collected during the session helped shape the discussion and provided additional context for panelist responses.

Moderator: Matthew Newman, Department Chair and 4-H State Program Leader, Rutgers University

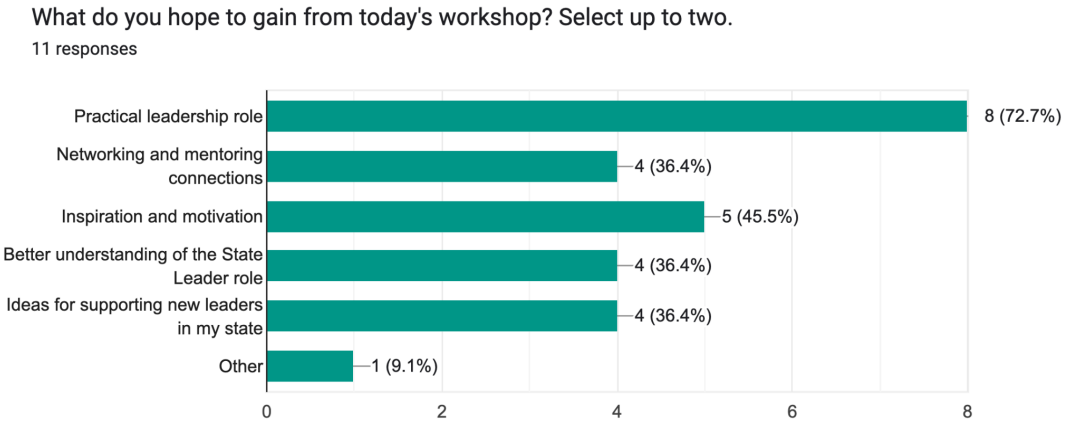
Panelists:



- T. Ashley Burns, Ph.D., 4-H Youth Development Program Team Director Associate Extension Specialist, Clemson University
- Rukeia Draw, Ph.D., Executive Director, ECOP 4-H Leadership Committee and 4-H Program Leaders Working Group (PLWG)
- Kimberly Holmes, Ph.D. Statewide Director of the University of California 4-H Youth Development Program
- Casey Mull, Ph.D., Assistant Director of Extension and State 4-H Program Leader, Purdue University
- Jennifer Skuza, Ph.D., Associate Dean and Department Head, Department of Youth Development, University of Minnesota; ECOP 4-H NC Representative
- Jen Cushman, Ph.D. State 4-H Program Leader, Hartford County 4-H Extension Educator, University of Connecticut

Participant Feedback: Pre-Session Survey Results

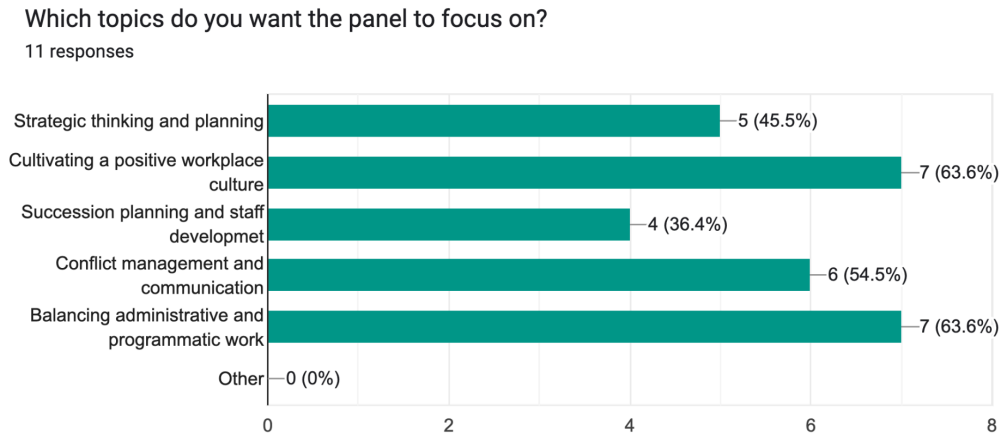
What Participants Hoped to Gain



Participants primarily indicated interest in practical leadership application, followed by inspiration and relationship-building.



Topics Participants Wanted the Panel to Address



These responses aligned with themes addressed during the panel discussion, particularly around workplace culture, leadership balance, and strategic focus.

Qualities Admired in Effective Leaders

Participants were asked to share, in one word or phrase, the quality they most admire in an effective leader. Responses included:

- Confidence
- Passion
- Motivational
- Poise
- Honesty
- Integrity
- Support and empowerment
- Inspiration
- Willingness to stand up for those working for them

These responses emphasized character, relational leadership, and staff advocacy.



Questions Participants Would Ask a Seasoned State Program Leader

Participants were invited to submit one question they would ask an experienced State Program Leader. Questions included:

- How do you collaborate and strategize with your advancement/foundation team?
- Would you do it all over again?
- How do you avoid getting stuck in the “blah” of the position?
- How did you protect and grow program quality and workforce relevance during times of shrinking resources and rising expectations?
- What is the most challenging part of your work? What is most rewarding?
- What is the biggest challenge you face in your role?

Several of these questions directly shaped the live Q&A portion of the workshop, particularly discussions related to advancement strategy, maintaining motivation, resource constraints, and balancing operational demands.

Thematic Discussion Highlights

Strategic Thinking and Time Management

- Protecting dedicated time for strategic thinking through calendar blocking and designated planning periods.
- Establishing structured “pause to plan” windows during the year to reduce meeting volume and focus on long-term priorities.
- Using leadership retreats and multi-day planning sessions to align statewide goals.
- Recognizing the tension between daily crisis management and long-term strategy.
- Identifying personal conditions that support deep thinking (e.g., protected work blocks, remote days, structured reflection time).

Planning, Priorities, and First-Year Realities

- Expecting constant operational demands rather than a predictable transition year.



- Learning organizational structure early to understand alignment between state, regional, and local roles.
- Shadowing local educators and visiting club programs to inform strategic decisions.
- Evaluating national initiatives against state capacity to avoid initiative overload.
- Implementing consistent communication tools (e.g., regular priority updates, written summaries) to reinforce direction.
- Balancing organizational needs, regional context, and leadership voice amid change fatigue.

Advancement and Foundation Collaboration

- Meeting regularly with advancement partners to maintain alignment and momentum.
- Clarifying roles between university-wide foundations and 4-H-specific foundations.
- Aligning fundraising priorities with programmatic strategy.
- Refining and consistently communicating the case for support.
- Engaging board members and donors in conversations about direction and impact.

Succession Planning and Emerging Leaders

- Observing staff strengths and identifying individuals with aptitude for special projects or expanded roles.
- Providing stretch assignments, committee placements, and national engagement opportunities.
- Offering qualitative feedback to reinforce leadership behaviors.
- Communicating leadership potential directly to emerging leaders.
- Affirming leadership capacity broadly across statewide networks while monitoring who steps forward.



Workplace Culture, Communication, and Leadership Balance

- Balancing administrative responsibilities with programmatic leadership.
- Managing competing stakeholder expectations across the university, community, and national contexts.
- Maintaining staff morale during policy shifts and resource constraints.
- Proactively communicating with university leadership through concise written updates and early issue notification.
- Aligning 4-H messaging with broader institutional priorities to strengthen relevance.

Leadership Competencies and Development Needs

- High interest in practical leadership application and real-world examples.
- Strong emphasis on cultivating a positive workplace culture and balancing administrative and programmatic work.
- Identified competency areas: communication, strategic leadership, people development, stakeholder relations, fiscal management, and crisis/operations management.
- Lower confidence areas included policy/governance, fiscal management, and crisis leadership.
- Participant-admired leadership qualities centered on integrity, confidence, empowerment, advocacy, and inspiration.

Key Takeaways

- Participants prioritized practical leadership skill-building and workplace culture topics.
- Strategic time management and alignment of priorities were recurring themes.



- Advancement, collaboration, and succession planning were identified as ongoing leadership responsibilities.
- Communication within teams and upward to university leadership was emphasized as a core function of the role.
- The discussion reflected the operational complexity of state leadership and its impact on youth and staff development.



Day 2 Highlights | Tuesday, February 24th, 2026

Welcome and 4-H National Leadership Meeting Overview

Opening Keynote: A New Learning Contract for Students

Speaker: Kathleen deLaski, Founder and Board Chair, Education Design Lab

Session Overview

Kathleen deLaski's keynote explored how changes in higher education and workforce expectations are reshaping the career pathways young people take. She introduced the concept of a "new learning contract," where traditional college degrees are no longer the only signal of readiness for work. Instead, employers are increasingly recognizing alternative learning experiences—such as short-term credentials, skills-based training, and applied learning—as valid ways to demonstrate workforce readiness.

Participant Q&A and Discussion Highlights

- Role of college degrees in hiring: Participants asked whether degree requirements are still necessary for many jobs. DeLaski noted that employers often continue to hire candidates with degrees because the credential provides a familiar "package" of qualifications—even when other candidates may have comparable skills.
- Alternative pathways to demonstrate skills: While degrees remain valuable, microcredentials and short-term skill certifications are increasingly common ways for individuals who do not pursue a traditional degree to demonstrate competencies.
- Year Up workforce training model as an example: DeLaski highlighted the Year Up program, which provides participants without degrees with six months of intensive training focused on technical and professional ("human") skills. These credentials are increasingly recognized by employers as indicators of job readiness.
- Building employer trust in new credentials: Participants asked how organizations can help employers recognize and value alternative credentials. DeLaski



emphasized the importance of tracking participant outcomes and collecting data on skill development and career placement.

- Implications for youth development programs: Participants discussed whether 4-H programs could adopt similar models, using credentials or skill-based recognition to help young people demonstrate competencies gained through hands-on learning and workforce experiences.

Panel Discussion

Moderator: Jeremy Johnson, Co-Chair, ECOP 4-H Leadership Committee; Associate Director for Youth and State 4-H Leader, Virginia Tech

Panelists:

- Kathleen deLaski, Founder and Board Chair, Education Design Lab
- Nicole Swinson, Youth Development Associate Specialist, Virginia State University
- Chad Niman, Forest Products Specialist

Session Overview

This panel explored how youth programs can better prepare young people for future careers by supporting exploration, strengthening credential pathways, and connecting learning experiences to education and workforce opportunities. Panelists discussed encouraging youth to see careers as a journey rather than a single path, aligning youth experiences with CTE and credential opportunities, and building stronger partnerships with schools, colleges, and industry to create clearer pathways. The discussion also highlighted opportunities to expand access through online learning models, involve youth more directly in shaping programs, and increase awareness of career options in fields such as youth development and Extension.

Participant Discussions/Comments/Questions:

1. What Mindset Do Young People Need Now to Thrive?

Key Points Shared

- Youth should understand that one career path need not be permanent.



- Encouraging youth to explore their “spark” and interests can help them discover possible career directions.
  Careers were described as a journey in which pivoting is normal rather than a single fixed destination.
- “One career path doesn’t have to be the absolute path… It’s okay to pivot.”

2. Where Can Youth Begin Blending Technical Skills with Human-Centered Skills?

Key Points Shared

- One approach discussed was infusing university work and expertise into the school day, particularly through CTE programs.
- Programs can be centered around students and their experiences, helping them see how technical and applied skills connect to real opportunities.

3. How Could Programs Scale to Reach More Youth?

Key Points Shared

- One strategy shared was to design programs primarily online.
- Online formats allow teachers to complete training at their own pace, potentially expanding participation.

4. How Do You Keep Youth Engaged in Credential Programs?

Key Points Shared

- Youth engagement increases when young people’s voices are included in the process.
- Youth can serve as ambassadors for programs and may help identify solutions and improvements.
- Another perspective emphasized connecting credentials to employer needs and working with industry partners to identify valuable skills.
- Engaging opportunities should appear early in the pathway, rather than requiring youth to take classes that feel disconnected from outcomes.



- Expanding “front doors” to credentials and opportunities was highlighted as important.

5. How Can Dual Enrollment Support Credential Pathways?

Key Points Shared

- Participants suggested intentional dual-enrollment partnerships with high school districts.
- Instead of students choosing courses randomly, schools and colleges could create pathways aligned with future career goals.
- These partnerships could support funding for student pathways.

6. What Commitment Can Programs Make to Prepare Youth for Life?

Key Points Shared

- Programs should make themselves visible and accessible so that youth know the opportunities exist.
- Another perspective emphasized honoring the pathways and foundation already built within the program.

7. Participant Question: Is There Potential for Community-Based Credentialing and Career Exposure?

Key Points Shared

- Leadership and early childhood education programs already prepare youth to work with and mentor younger participants.
- These experiences were described as closely mapped to existing high school CTE pathways, suggesting potential alignment with recognized credentials.
- Ensuring projects match the state Department of Education standards could strengthen this alignment.
- Expanding online classes was mentioned as another way to increase opportunities.



- One perspective noted that careers in Extension were not among the options they had originally considered, suggesting the value of exposing youth to these career options.
- Participants also suggested intentional dual-enrollment pathways with colleges that align with students' future goals.

From Farm to Future: A Replicable AgriCulinary Career & Workforce Skill Builder Model

Session Overview
This session showcased Virginia State University's AgriCulinary Academy as a workforce development model connecting youth to careers across agriculture, culinary arts, hospitality, and food systems through hands-on learning, credentialing, and partnerships.

Facilitators:

- Nicole Swinson, Youth Development Extension Associate Specialist, Virginia State University
- Chef Radelle Reese, Culinary & Hospitality Educator, Virginia State University

Key Highlights
Presenters described the AgriCulinary Academy as a structured pathway that guides youth from initial interest to skill development, credential attainment, and career exploration. The program is implemented through collaboration between Virginia State University's College of Agriculture and Hospitality Management, Virginia Cooperative Extension, local schools, and industry partners.

The model uses a "seed-to-service" approach, where youth engage across the full food system, including:

- Agricultural production on the VSU farm
- Food processing, preparation, and safety
- Service and hospitality experiences

Youth participate in hands-on learning experiences such as:



- Farm and food system site visits
- Mobile kitchen simulations and on-site labs
- Student-operated restaurant environments
- Industry tours, job shadowing, and internships
- Classroom-based activities connecting food to global systems and culture

The session also included participation and growth data, including:

- AgriCulinary Tech Chef Challenge grew from 60 to 450 participants
- 390+ youth engaged in workshops
- Implementation across 9+ schools in Virginia

Presenters shared that the program is designed to be flexible across school settings, including schools without kitchen facilities, and aligned with CTE pathways, classroom standards, and postsecondary options.

Credentials and Career Preparation

The program includes a focus on credentialing and workforce readiness, with youth working toward:

- Industry-recognized credentials such as ServSafe Manager
- Work-based learning experiences, including internships and apprenticeships

Youth are introduced to multiple roles within the hospitality and food systems industries, including:

- Back-of-house (culinary preparation)
- Front-of-house (customer service)
- Operations, sales, marketing, and management

Industry partners, including hotels and restaurants, offer opportunities for youth to gain real-world experience.

Capstone Experience: AgriCulinary Tech Chef Challenge



Presenters highlighted the annual Tech Chef Challenge as a culminating experience where high school students:

- Prepare dishes within a set timeframe using limited resources
- Utilize farm-based ingredients
- Are evaluated on sanitation, technique, and presentation by industry professionals

The event is designed to simulate real-world conditions and reinforce technical skills, time management, and professionalism.

Key Themes

- Workforce programs include a combination of:
  - Hands-on skill development
  - Career exploration
  - Work-based learning
- Programs are designed to align with:
  - Secondary education systems (CTE and classroom standards)
  - Postsecondary pathways (community college, four-year programs, direct-to-workforce)
- Partnerships across Extension, universities, schools, and industry support implementation

Discussion Questions

Facilitators:

- Dave Francis, Ph.D., Co-Chair, 4-H PLWG; Extension Youth Development Program Director, Utah State University
- Jeremy Johnson, Co-Chair, ECOP 4-H Leadership Committee; Associate Director for Youth and State 4-H Leader, Virginia Tech

Participants were asked to complete the following questions via Google Form.



Readiness Contract Application to 4-H

If 4-H were to fully embrace a readiness contract grounded in Skills Agility, Human Advantage, and Career Experience, what could that change about how we design programs, build partnerships, and support youth in a rapidly shifting world? (7 responses)

- The change would be to guide students toward metacognition rather than specific skills.
- Manola Erby
- I think it gives a clear mission & guidelines for new programs & volunteers who want to get involved. Relating programs to the real-world experience young people need to be successful in their futures. It also sends a clear message to partners about what 4-H is doing & how it helps build these skill sets in the young people who participate.
- Program shift to be much more intentional
- Those who know us [4-H] know that there is an inherent value for employers looking for 4-H alums to hire because of the skills that
- Strength in individual states/locations, but a disconnect with national identity or credential (e.g., no “Eagle Scout” or “National FFA degree” equivalent)
- How can we leverage our reputation to the benefit of all?
- Provide opportunities for skills and abilities acquisition that will stand the test of time and credential those and interweave them in your program, partnerships, and support for youth. Though the world changes, those skills are paramount but are taken for granted on the front end, but exist as a premium on the back end. Bake them in, require them.
- Focusing on Middle and High school, continue with workplace readiness skills such as public speaking, respect, soft skills, and general soft skills.

Live Participant Comments/Questions:

- How can we address barriers embedded in the LGUs?



    - Voiced fear of credentials not bringing in the dollars to the university
    - Some positions at Universities require a bachelor's degree
- How can we start to prove that these credentials are real and prepare employees for the workforce?

Institutional/Organizational Readiness:

What changes must our system make to equip youth with the skills, experiences, and credentials the future demands? (6 responses)

- More collaboration with industry to understand what is needed.
- Change the mindset of how we provide programs to youth.
    - Organizational-Institutional disconnect between investing in youth who are more likely to stay in-state and fulfill the LGU mission
    - Can we demonstrate readiness for collegiate work?
    - Shift faculty mindsets to strict research/teaching within the window; overcome the fear of LGU or college losing
- Keep those hard/durable skills. Critical thinking abilities that can be clearly recognized and accepted by our external partnerships.
- Having agents and volunteers gain insight on how to unpack the Standard of Learning and CTE competencies can aid teachers within the school and welcome the extra help 4-H can provide.
- Prioritization of programming; retention of positions in the field

Live Participant Comments/Questions:

- We talk about a rapidly shifting world. So we don’t know what will be needed 5 years from now, but we do know what stands the test of time, like life skills and things that will not go away.



- Making sure the soft skills and life skills are part of every step of the credentials and market them well so they build partnerships and get things off the ground
- Take the emphasis off of what might be in the future and focus on the ones that stand the test of time.
- Taking it to a place where we know the credentials mean something to employers

Implications for Partnership and Larger Ecosystem

If we want to grow, what must fundamentally change in how we connect with partners and engage new and existing audiences across the ecosystem? (5 responses)

- We need to meet with partners and connect with more to create intentional pathways.
- Willingness to engage at a county level.
- 3 thoughts:
    - Tell our 4-H story and public value that connects directly to that audience – while we can't be everything to everyone, can we be that one thing that everyone wants?
    - Need development/foundation support to carry the message and benefit of 4-H; reciprocally need to provide the opportunities for development to steward gifts effectively with impact/outcome messaging.
    - How can we also invest in volunteers/volunteer engagement – industry connections
- Use our resources to develop the partnerships, Clover by 4-H, curriculum, and summer camp opportunities. We have to respond to the needs assessment of the community.
- 4-H is sometimes the best-kept secret. We need to market more to make 4-H relevant everywhere.

Live Participant Comments/Questions:



- Reduce barriers by incorporating university leaders
- Improve forecasting of the future and where the workforce is going → then we can shift our approach to match
- Coding can/will be replaced with AI, but computational thinking will last.
- How can we strategically work with schools that make sense with our potential partners?
    - We do a great job of marketing to people that already know us, but what does it look like to expand marketing to those who don't, or have an inaccurate idea of it?
- Clover by 4-h – use it to close PD gaps for teachers to teach a specific skill, so we have a deliverable.
- Opportunities for partnerships in Washington need to be more creative in the partners and funding.
    - They need to make it understandable to them, like pushing STEM and life skills instead of caring for livestock (reframing the words/work)

Gap Identification/Next Steps

What's the one thing we have not yet said out loud, and what can we start doing immediately to move the system forward? (4 responses)

- Get our deans and presidents in the room to get them to understand the importance of starting these programs in middle and high school.
- Increase capacity so that we can invest in these activities that will create huge organizational benefits! Just do it.
- Identify and create one rallying cry to provide national strength to that 1 thing??? Based on history, alumni awareness, and existing structures, could we leverage National 4-H Congress (often used as a recognition trip) as a capstone/unifying experience to confer national recognition? By earning the state-sanctioned/endorsed (even if not paid for) experience to attend the event,



there is a common message (and cannot go back/return attendee) and skills that are reinforced as that one/national thing. I always hear, I went to “Congress” or “Chicago,” and that carries tremendous weight and pride...can we use that to our advantage for “I earned my National 4-H [clover/degree/certificate, etc.]”?

- Telling the story of 4-H more broadly. What has been the marketing strategy of your specific program? How are we using the index study to market growth opportunities?
- We have to market the 4-H workplace possibilities.

Live Participant Comments/Questions:

- As an extension admin, I push forward emerging ideas– make sure your admin is on board, and you stay in their faces about your impact and what you need
- Are ECOPS going to help us? Of course!
- From the fund development side: Even though we are always looking for more numbers, when we offer more short programs for families/kids, we lose the legacy part of it.
    - If we don't ensure the programs kids are diving into are long-term, and parents don't see the impact of 4-H, eventually it will get harder and harder to ensure long-term exposure and understanding of the programs/impact.
    - Consider how the data is shared and what the funders are looking for so that the data shows long-term investment/legacy.
    - It should be part of their identity, versus a one-time camp.
- We hear more and more about employee engagement, where they want to volunteer and contribute their expertise.... people reach out but don't know about their local chapter. How can we use those kinds of episodic volunteers beyond packing backpacks and connecting their impact to programs?



A Vision and Commitment to Preparing Youth to be Ready for Life and Work

Facilitators:

- Jennifer Skuza, Ph.D., Associate Dean and Department Head, Department of Youth Development, University of Minnesota; ECOP 4-H NC Representative
- Lisa Diaz, Ph.D., National 4-H Beyond Ready Director; Sr. Director, Learning Innovations in Workplace Readiness, University of Illinois

Session Overview

Dr. Jennifer Skuza and Dr. Lisa Diaz led participants through a collaborative session to assess progress across the pillars of the 4-H Beyond Ready initiative. Program leaders reflected on the level of advancement within their land-grant institutions and discussed concrete actions being taken to implement growth strategies and expand youth opportunities.

Through small-group discussions organized around individual pillars, participants shared examples of early successes, identified challenges, and exchanged ideas for strengthening implementation. The activity emphasized peer learning and collective problem-solving to help program leaders advance their Beyond Ready action plans and contribute to the initiative's long-term goal of reaching 10 million youth annually.

Participant Feedback: The Pillars of Building Our 4-H Beyond Ready Initiative

Responses collected from handouts and digital forms have been reorganized by pillar and aligned to the original handout questions for clarity and ease of review. All wording has been preserved as submitted. When multiple groups responded to the same pillar, their comments are labeled and presented together to easily identify themes and repeated ideas.



Pillar 1: System Mobilization

Table Participants

- Missouri, Wyoming, Lincoln U, NDSU, OK State, UConn, Florida, Maine, NY/Cornell, NH

1) What concrete and measurable steps have you taken to advance this pillar?

- FL & Cornell→ used Extension re-org / strategic plan to align & create committee 4 priority workgroups
- OK → county-level review process using PRKCs
- OK → using state in-services to keep BR language in front of folks
- FL → used BR as a throughline for onboarding new professionals
- CONN → ↑ for volunteers

2) What is your advice for helping others get started or advance their initiative-building in this pillar?

- Who needs to be at the table? What voices do you want?
- Make sure that episodic participation by youth is still valued
- Know your typical pain points/partners who might not love BR
- Small wins/low-hanging fruit → message that success continually to volunteers & staff
- Don't eat the whole block of cheese → find the BR parts that work for your context

3) What resources have or could be valuable to program leaders in advancing this pillar?

- Big funder in your back pocket to support an early success
- Using the modern definition to capture "pseudo" 4-H'ers



- Appreciated all the shared templates (one-pagers)
- Synergy between state, regional/field specialists, & county 4-H professionals → overcommunicate so we are on the same page
- Tim Tanner staffing plan resource

Pillar 2: Growth

Table Participants

- Group 1: Texas A&M, California, NC State, UAPB, Miss. State
- Group 2: North Carolina, Fort Valley, Nevada, Georgia (UGA), Southern University A&M, Virginia State University, Southern University community to more external groups (writing unclear)
- Group 3: Virginia State University, Fort Valley State

1) What concrete and measurable steps have you taken to advance this pillar?

Group 1

- Career day at junior & high schools
- Partnerships with schools ×2 & afterschool programs
- Identifying more cutting-edge programming
- Volunteering leadership for young alumni
- More consistent record-keeping training for staff to report numbers

Group 2

- Nevada – 5% youth focus to include tribal population
- Virginia Cooperative Extension – PEARS system helps delineate contacts made
- Established new partners for youth, serving partners – Ft. Valley



- NC – incorporating more efforts for increasing participation in things and programs already established

Group 3

- PEARS reporting software

2) What is your advice for helping others get started or advance their initiative-building in this pillar?

Group 1

- Share program highlights at the monthly statewide staff meeting
- Training for professional staff that is intentional & year-round, including: coaches and mentors

Group 2

- Build relationships! That is how we can continue to capitalize on this movement
- Utilize existing structure & programming
- Good, solid communication strategy

Group 3

- Build relationships

3) What resources have or could be valuable to program leaders in advancing this pillar?

Group 1

- Volunteers
- Finance and funding people

Group 2

- A tool for quickly sharing what 4-H is



Group 3

- Having a seasoned 4-H member to help share and tell the stories

Pillar 3: High-Capacity Staff, Volunteers, & Partners

Table Participants

Group 1: Alcorn, Louisiana State Univ., NC A&T, FAMU, PYD Academy

Group 2: Alcorn State University

Group 3: Jamie Harris, Janet Golden, Kasey Bozeman, Cathy Haas, Marla Lowder, Nancy Ooki, Terri _____, Wade _____

1) What concrete and measurable steps have you taken to advance this pillar?

Group 1

- Connecting volunteer training & external community partners
- working w/ local schools with work-based trgs (writing unclear)
- Required training series with funding incentives
- Aligned work with the Beyond Ready framework, showing practical connections
- Being intentional in hiring practices
- Aligning programming and staffing
- Getting staff to see a picture of how their local role fits into the overall

Group 2

- Start assessing

Group 3

- Survey volunteer staff to identify gaps
- We are already doing this → emphasize career and align events



- Partners – be the bridge for them to have impact w/ youth (I have the experts)
- Owing to being the expert in YO (writing unclear)→ you are contact led to grants/projects
- Integration into state events increases career readiness
- Partners– endured position CTE – reached out across campus
- Made advisory board – invited in early adopter agents
- Volunteer institute – roll out
- Multiple roll-outs to faculty (3 times) — keep inviting people in
- Redesign the code of conduct – volunteer focus more on engagement

2) What is your advice for helping others get started or advance their initiative-building in this pillar?

Group 1

- How do you maintain the synergy once you have staff aligned?
- Teamwork – statewide programs
- team projects to show “this is how it should be done.”
- Encouragement
- Multi-disciplinary collaborations

Group 2

- Get buy-in

Group 3

- Communities of practice – animal sciences – etc. → embed Beyond Ready program quality



- Great2Grow – trade program
- Use the terms
- Community college partnerships
- Systematic onboarding – introducing BR early on
- Grant team focused on pathways

3) What resources have or could be valuable to program leaders in advancing this pillar?

Group 1

- (No response recorded)

Group 2

- Curriculum

Group 3

- Strategic plan completed; hopefully, it will result in a new position

Pillar 4: High Quality Programs

The facilitators intentionally skipped this pillar.

Pillar 5: Data Collection Infrastructure

Table Participants

Group 1: Nebraska, Virginia Tech, Washington State, Auburn, Kansas State, Rutgers, Clemson



1) What concrete and measurable steps have you taken to advance this pillar?

Group 1

- CRM infrastructure in place at some organizations
- PEARS (NE and KS – most consistent reporting system) and/or Salesforce (SC & AL)
- Potential for consistency and automations
- Dashboards and reporting
- Pillar areas for program priorities to address signature programs, benchmarks, foundations, etc.
- Fidelity in focused areas
- Level-setting = ALL Extension programming is 4-H (by definition)
- Balance between "credit" / "ownership" and capturing data
- Ensuring expectations and systems are clearly aligned/defined
- Many opportunities to leverage systems in place – system mobilization/alignment, program evaluation, reporting metrics, etc.

2) What is your advice for helping others get started or advance their initiative-building in this pillar?

Group 1

- Know what you want and move in that direction (lots of voices at the table and in the room)

3) What resources have or could be valuable to program leaders in advancing this pillar?

Group 1



- Explore available systems to meet your system's needs: 4HOnline, ZSuite, custom tools, Salesforce, PEARS, etc.

Pillar 6: Data for Storytelling & Planning

Table Participants

Group 1: VSU, UNH, CSU, Montana State

Group 2: (Not specified in submission)

1) What concrete and measurable steps have you taken to advance this pillar?

Group 1

- Formalized reporting metrics around common measures
- Created a consistent assessment tool for 4-H agents to utilize
- Established a consistent data picture for system use
- Leveraging data to create marketing products to tell our story locally and virtually

Group 2

- Created meaningful and consistent information for use throughout their program
- Worked for the accuracy of data from the field to the state level
- Intentional collection of quality quotes, photos, or other qualitative resources that can be readily accessible and utilized
- Focus on creating similar language and understanding of the data collected
- Success Stories - Focusing on Quotes, Photographs, etc, that can be pulled easily and used across platforms.
- Articles – Educators required to do 8/year
- Correcting accuracy (similar data being reported the same way)



- Working on timing for better use throughout the year.
- Similar language, use, and continuity for in-house and stakeholder understanding
- Reporting is not consistent at the moment (working on getting the stories/reports)

2) What is your advice for helping others get started or advance their initiative-building in this pillar?

Group 1

- Ensure data systems capture common measure metrics
- Use data intentionally to create robust storytelling products for partners

Group 2

- Makes communication between youth, field staff, volunteers, specialists, and community stakeholders easier due to a shared understanding of results and direction.
- Depends on the role and program (measured for youth, change, participation, etc.)

3) What resources have or could be valuable to program leaders in advancing this pillar?

Group 1

- A process stack that illustrates successful methods from start to finish

Group 2

- 4-H Online
- 4-H Foundation is looking for access to those stories/results that can be shared with stakeholders.
- Lots of systems (explore the options and see what's possible to meet your system's needs) - 4HOnline, ZSuite, custom tools, Salesforce, PEARs, etc.)



- Standardized Assessment/Survey Tools
- Reporting Systems (creating consistency)
    - KERS
    - PAIRS (Kansas State created)
    - Other

Pillar 7: Fundraising

Table Participants

Group 1: Iowa, Georgia, Ohio

1) What concrete and measurable steps have you taken to advance this pillar?

Group 1

- Creating pitch deck for foundations w/ core areas of focus
- Focused on relationships w/ key donors to align mission & vision to their goals w/ youth data → leads to trust-based philanthropy

2) What is your advice for helping others get started or advance their initiative-building in this pillar?

Group 1

- Navigate how you set up successful 1:1s w/ foundation / PL (writing unclear) → what is your comm. plan together?

3) What resources have or could be valuable to program leaders in advancing this pillar?

Group 1

- Finding strategies that would help create unrestricted funds instead of specified funds



- Creating a sustainability plan for the funding plan

4-H Beyond Ready Program Leadership Academy

Session Overview

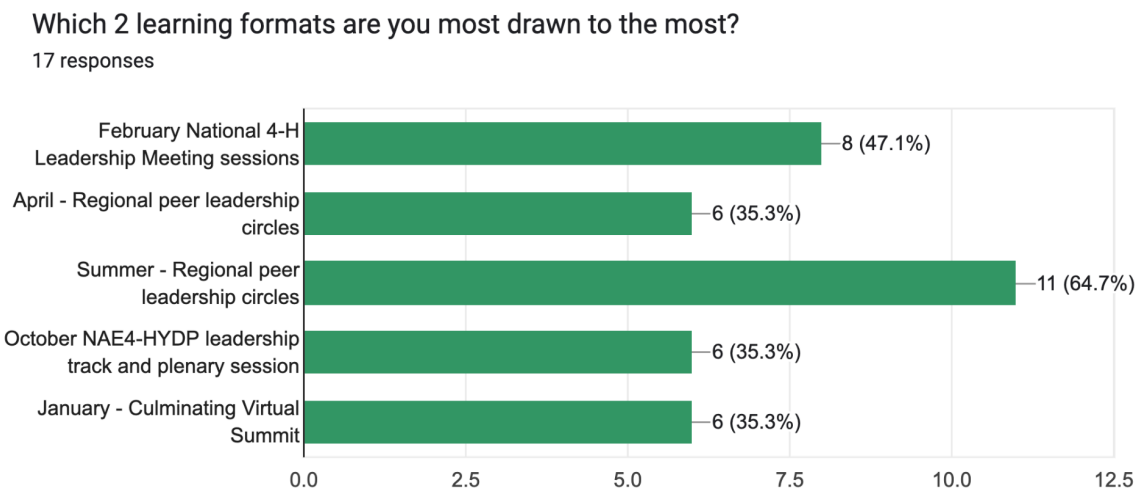
Dr. Lisa Diaz introduced the 4-H Beyond Ready Program Leadership Academy, a new professional development initiative designed to strengthen the leadership capacity of state 4-H program leaders as they advance the Beyond Ready initiative. The Academy integrates applied learning, peer collaboration, and mentorship to support leaders in building and implementing strategic growth plans within their institutions.

Participants reviewed the structure of the Academy, which includes in-person learning at the National 4-H Leadership Meeting, regional peer leadership circles, a leadership track at the NAE4-HYDP conference, and a culminating virtual summit. The session emphasized the importance of developing leadership skills that support system mobilization, partnership development, data-informed decision-making, and sustainable program growth.

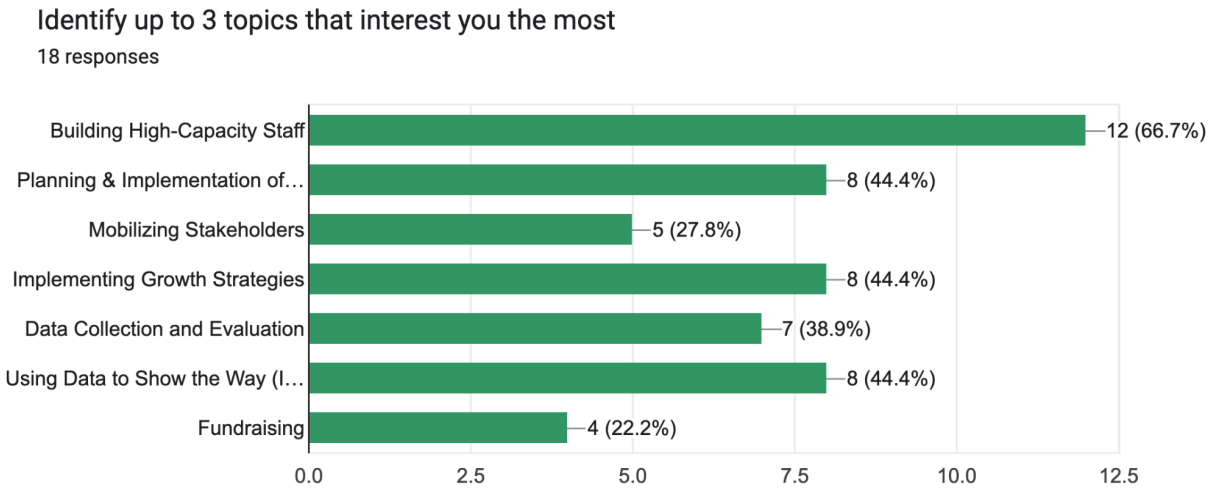
Facilitator: Lisa Diaz, Ph.D., National 4-H Beyond Ready Director; Sr. Director, Learning Innovations in Workplace Readiness, University of Illinois

Participant Feedback: Which 2 learning formats are you drawn to the most?





Participant Feedback: Identify up to 3 topics that interest you the most.





2025 National 4-H Index Study

Session Overview

Dr. Jill Lingard of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln presented findings from the 2025 National 4-H Index Study, which examines the experiences and developmental outcomes of youth participating in 4-H programs across the country. Drawing on survey responses from more than 7,000 youth across 38 states, the study highlighted strong indicators of program quality, including high levels of belonging, positive youth–adult relationships, and opportunities for youth to explore their interests.

Participants discussed how the study's findings can strengthen the public value narrative for 4-H by demonstrating measurable outcomes in areas such as leadership, responsibility, and college and career readiness. The session also explored how program leaders can use these insights to support storytelling, stakeholder engagement, and advocacy efforts that communicate the impact of 4-H programs nationwide.

Facilitator: Jill Lingard, Ph.D., Extension Professor, 4-H Youth Development, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Participant Feedback: How will you utilize the Index Study results and Public Value reports with stakeholders?

(13 responses)

- To encourage buy-in to become volunteers and sponsor Youth engagement activities.
- Share and promote to new stakeholders.
- Sharing with stakeholders and sharing with educators on how to use the information/resources. Use snippets in other communications.
- Benchmark our own programming. Where are we hitting the mark, and where do we have opportunities for improvement?
- I plan to share with University leadership so they can see the importance of 4-H.
- To inform stakeholders
- Sharing with county commissioners & foundation board members as well as legislators.



- Better tell the story of why to work with 4-H.
- Created simple infographics for state report AND rack cards for legislators/4-H Legislative Day handouts
- We use it with our state legislators and county government
- Share our 4-H story
- Share to build awareness and to invite additional partners to the fold whose values align with Beyond Ready and 4-H in general.
- As I develop as a 4-H Specialist, the 4-H Index will help me speak facts to program leaders.

Participant Feedback: What is still needed to better equip you to share the results?

(13 responses)

- A quarterly timeline of reporting rather than just annually.
- State-specific data and/or reports. Comparisons of age groups from year to year. For example, compare the 2022 14-year-olds to the 2023 15-year-olds to the 2024 16-year-olds for trends. Ways to evaluate group enrollment of youth?
- Some premade sheets addressing the items that can be handed to stakeholders.
- Infographics, rack cards, and social media squares would be helpful to highlight targeted results.
- State-level data (Alabama is working on this now)
- N/A
- Way to engage stale
- Better local training
- What are the demographics of the respondents this year overall? (Think this was shared in a previous summary, but not this year's summary) - What does it mean that 4-H'ers see themselves as "professional" because of 4-H (what are the indicators); can we get any qualitative data - potential follow-up to share 4-H story (somehow map back to data points/states); like the "give me an example when..."
- More templates to translate the data to different types of audiences
- PowerPoint with guided notes
- Not sure
- A PDF version emailed to me



Participant Feedback: What topics are on the horizon for public value stories in 2026?

(9 responses)

- Career Development and Apprenticeship success stories.
- Mental health and connections, safety concerns (belonging, feeling safe in tumultuous times).
- AI, engagement with the community.
- Number of Credentialed or graduate students
- Preparedness for college, specifically, preparedness for work/trades, specifically
- Preparing youth to navigate uncertainty
- Skills developed in 4-H and how youth articulated their use in life, school, etc.
- Career Pathways and Exploration, AI Instruction, Hybrid Instruction
- Youth Innovation in Food Security and Food Access

Day 3 Highlights | Wednesday, February 25th, 2026

Mobilizing the Network: 4-H's Tentpole Moments & Alumni Strategy

Presenters:

- Heather Elliott, Chief Development and Marketing Officer, National 4-H Council
- Natalie Godwin, Vice President, Communications, National 4-H Council
- Jake Worcester, Vice President, Development, National 4-H Council

Session Overview

This session explored strategies for mobilizing the broader 4-H network through coordinated storytelling, national campaigns, and alumni engagement. Presenters highlighted key "tentpole moments"—including Signing Season, the Fair experience, and



National 4-H Week—as opportunities to amplify youth stories, increase public awareness, and strengthen engagement across the 4-H community.

Participants also discussed the development of a system-wide alumni engagement strategy designed to reconnect the network of 4-H alumni as mentors, advocates, volunteers, and donors. The conversation emphasized the role alumni can play in expanding partnerships, increasing visibility, and supporting the long-term growth goals of the Beyond Ready initiative.

Signing Season & Graduation Recognition

Participant Feedback

- Several participants shared that the “signing day” framing did not resonate locally, particularly outside sports contexts. One participant noted that “they only like it for sports,” suggesting the concept felt unfamiliar for many youth and families.
- However, many programs found success by reframing the moment as a celebration of graduates and their next steps, rather than focusing strictly on the signing concept.
- Participants described a variety of ways they recognized graduates:
    - Graduation kits including cords, yard signs, and branded stoles
    - Partnerships with university graduation offices to distribute recognition materials
    - Stage recognition during ceremonies, even for youth not attending college
- A consistent theme was the importance of recognizing all post-graduation pathways, not just four-year colleges. One participant emphasized the need to “honor all pathways—college, trade school, or career.” Some states have already adjusted scholarships and messaging to include trade schools and workforce pathways.
- Several participants also emphasized the importance of family and community involvement. Programs discussed shifting celebrations to local levels and creating moments that include families in recognizing youth achievements.



- Participants also raised ideas for stronger connections with higher education institutions, including exploring whether certain 4-H experiences could translate into college credit opportunities in fields such as animal science or other land-grant programs.

Emerging trend: Programs are more successful when Signing Season is framed as a broad celebration of youth achievements and multiple future pathways, rather than mirroring athletic signing ceremonies.

Leveraging Fairs as Storytelling Opportunities

Key participant insights

- Participants saw fairs as a strong platform to demonstrate how 4-H prepares youth for the future. One example described fairs as essentially "the ultimate job fair," where youth demonstrate real-world skills through their projects.
- Storytelling was highlighted as particularly powerful when it connects traditional 4-H activities with broader messages about workforce readiness and inclusion. One story shared during the session reinforced the idea that "agriculture is for anyone."
- Participants expressed interest in creating more engaging experiences at fairs, including interactive elements and social media amplification that help visitors understand the broader impact of 4-H programs.

Emerging trend: Participants see fairs not just as exhibitions but as storytelling platforms to connect 4-H experiences to career skills and workforce readiness.

National 4-H Week

Participant experiences and challenges

- Lighting buildings and landmarks green remains a popular activity, but several participants reported institutional barriers. One participant noted that their university cannot illuminate buildings unless there is a federal declaration.



- Others shared successful partnerships with landmarks or public spaces. One example involved lighting a major bridge green, which generated strong engagement and helped build partnerships and awareness.
- Participants discussed the need to better explain why landmarks are lit green, suggesting signage or messaging so people passing by understand the purpose.
- Some participants reflected that National 4-H Week activities have evolved over time. One participant commented that “30 years ago it was a big thing,” but suggested that some current activities may not resonate as strongly with youth today.
- There was interest in revitalizing activities that build excitement, particularly through STEM or healthy living initiatives similar to past national experiments that generated media attention.
- Participants also shared examples of youth-led advocacy. In one state, youth successfully advocated for an official 4-H Day, and now design stickers and promotional materials themselves.

Emerging trends

- Interest in youth-led advocacy and visibility campaigns
- Need for clearer messaging tied to public displays like green lighting
- Desire to refresh activities so they resonate with today’s youth

Alumni Engagement

Current reality shared by participants

- Many participants acknowledged that they do not yet have formal alumni engagement strategies.
- Several noted that alumni connections often happen informally or incidentally—for example, discovering someone is an alum only after they mention it in conversation.



- Participants expressed interest in better identifying alumni within their existing networks, including advisory boards and local leadership groups.
- One participant noted that alumni can be a very vocal constituency, observing that "4-H people are a vocal constituency who will speak up if they don't like something."
- Participants emphasized the potential for local alumni engagement, including:
    - Mentorship opportunities
    - Alumni events connected to universities
    - Recognition programs highlighting successful alumni
- A powerful example shared involved a recent graduate who credited 4-H with helping him achieve academic success and scholarships, and who now mentors younger students through a multi-state program.
- Participants also described creative alumni engagement initiatives, including:
    - A statewide "4 Under 40" recognition program where young alumni were nominated and voted on by youth
    - Affinity groups are designed to connect and support women in the program while raising funds

Emerging trend: Participants see alumni as a major growth opportunity, particularly for mentorship, advocacy, and volunteer capacity, but most programs lack structured systems to activate them.

Data and Systems Challenges

Participant concerns

- Many programs struggle with fragmented data systems, particularly when managing volunteers or alumni across multiple databases.
- One participant noted that information sometimes must be entered into multiple systems or spreadsheets, creating inefficiencies.



- Participants expressed interest in better integration between program databases and university CRMs, enabling alumni and volunteers to be more easily tracked and engaged.
- Some participants also raised questions about how broadly to define alumni, asking whether short-term participants, campers, or even highly involved parents should be included.
- Session leaders emphasized an inclusive approach, encouraging programs to welcome anyone who feels connected to 4-H.

Emerging trend: Effective alumni engagement will require better data integration and clearer systems for capturing and managing alumni relationships.

Growth Goals and Infrastructure

Participant reflections

- When discussing how alumni engagement could support program growth goals, participants noted that volunteer capacity may be a larger limiting factor than funding in some states.
- One participant shared that their program is currently pulling back slightly from expanding youth participation because the limiting factor is adult infrastructure and volunteer support.
- Participants expressed excitement about the potential for credentials and workforce partnerships, seeing opportunities to connect youth experiences with employers.
- There was also interest in using data and impact metrics to demonstrate value to potential donors and justify investment in staff positions focused on development and engagement.

Emerging trend: Many programs see alumni engagement as a way to strengthen the adult infrastructure—mentors, volunteers, advocates—needed to support future youth growth.

Participant Pulse Check



Participants were asked to rate their confidence or readiness related to several initiatives using a “fist-to-five” scale.

- Signing Season: mixed responses, mostly mid-range ratings (2–4)
- Fairs: broad spread of responses (2–5)
- National 4-H Week: generally higher confidence, mostly 4s and 5s
- Alumni engagement: widely varied responses

Overall pattern: Participants expressed the highest confidence around National 4-H Week activities, while alumni engagement and Signing Season showed greater variability and opportunities for further development.

ForestryWorks Certification: Make the Forest Your Career

Session Overview
This session highlighted ForestryWorks, a workforce development initiative that connects youth, educators, and Extension professionals to forestry and forest industry careers through training, certification, and industry partnerships.

Facilitators

- Chad Niman, Forest Products Specialist, University of Kentucky
- Laurie Thomas, University of Kentucky
- Ashley Osborne, University of Kentucky
- Frannie Preston, ForestryWorks of Kentucky Coordinator

Key Highlights

ForestryWorks was presented as part of a multi-state initiative, with Kentucky implementing the program through the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension system in partnership with industry, education, and state agencies.

The program was developed in response to identified workforce gaps in the forestry sector and is supported through partnerships with organizations, including the Kentucky Forestry Association, Department of Education, and forestry industry partners.



The model includes a 10-module curriculum delivered through high school CTE programs, 4-H, and Extension. Participants can earn a Forest Worker Certificate through completion of coursework and assessments.

Reported participation includes:

- 25 teachers and 9 Extension agents certified
- Approximately 320 students have earned certification since 2024

Experiential Learning and Career Exposure

The program includes field-based learning and career exposure through:

- A residential field course at Robinson Forest
- Industry site visits and internships
- Engagement with forestry professionals

Career pathways highlighted include logging, forest management, manufacturing, and emerging roles within the forest products sector.

Role of 4-H and Extension

ForestryWorks is integrated into 4-H and Extension programming to expand youth access to forestry education and career awareness, including use in field days, contests, and community-based programming.

Key Themes

- Alignment with workforce needs
- Use of certification within youth programming
- Partnerships across Extension, education, and industry



Beyond Ready to Launch: Integrating Drones, AI, and Financial Literacy

Session Overview
Tuskegee University presenters shared a youth-focused program that integrates drone training, artificial intelligence (AI), and financial literacy to support career exploration, credential pathways, and workforce readiness.

Facilitators

- Dr. Richard Whittington, Tuskegee University
- Sheanell Edwards, Tuskegee University

Key Highlights

The program combines hands-on technical training with career and life skill development, including:

- Drone operation and flight experience
- AI applications for writing, planning, and data use
- Financial literacy, including budgeting and income generation
- Leadership and professional skill development

Participants engage in hands-on drone activities, including guided flight exercises and demonstrations of AI-supported features such as object tracking. Presenters emphasized the importance of safety, including FAA guidelines and certification pathways such as TRUST certification (age 13+) and Part 107 licensure for commercial use.

The session also included examples of how AI is used within the program to support tasks such as document development, business planning, and budgeting, with an emphasis on appropriate and ethical use.



Career and Financial Applications

Presenters shared examples of how drone and technology skills can connect to income and career opportunities in areas such as agriculture, construction, real estate, and public safety.

Financial literacy was integrated throughout the program, including:

- Budgeting frameworks (e.g., 50/20/30 rule)
- Use of AI tools to support financial planning
- Examples of earning potential through drone-related work

Key Themes

- Integration of technical skills, financial literacy, and career exploration
- Emphasis on hands-on learning and real-world application
- Use of credential pathways and safety training within youth programming
- Importance of combining technical skills with communication and professional skills

Skilled Trades Showcase: UNH Grit to Grow Collaborative

Session Overview
This session introduced the University of New Hampshire's Grit to Grow Collaborative, a cross-sector initiative that connects youth to career pathways in skilled trades through coordinated partnerships among education, industry, and community organizations.

Facilitators

- Dr. Kate Korbas, University of New Hampshire Extension
- Steve Turner, Bring Back the Trades
- Dr. Jeffrey Beard, University of New Hampshire

Key Highlights



Presenters described the Grit to Grow Collaborative as a response to workforce challenges in New Hampshire, including youth out-migration, limited awareness of career pathways, and disconnects between education systems and employers.

The collaborative was formed through direct outreach to partners across sectors, including education, workforce organizations, and industry. Early partners include Granite Edvance, the Community College System of New Hampshire, the Department of Education, and industry groups such as Bring Back the Trades.

Bring Back the Trades shared examples of engagement strategies, including skills expos that connect students and families with employers and career opportunities through hands-on experiences.

Workforce Strategies and Activities

The collaborative is focused on aligning and expanding existing efforts through:

- Development of a statewide asset map of career pathways, training programs, and opportunities
- Exploration of a work-based learning hub to connect youth with internships and employers
- Hosting convenings such as the Grit to Grow Summit, which brings together youth, industry, and education for career exploration and planning

The session also included examples of tools currently used in the state, such as career exploration platforms and workforce mapping tools, and identified gaps in connecting youth to real-time opportunities.

Role of 4-H and Extension

Extension and 4-H were described as connectors within the collaborative, helping to convene partners, build relationships, and connect youth to existing opportunities rather than serving as technical training providers.

Key Themes



- Need for coordination across education, industry, and community partners
- Importance of increasing youth awareness of career pathways, including skilled trades
- Use of convenings, tools, and partnerships to connect youth to workforce opportunities

Internal/External Mobilization Strategies

Session Overview

Participants engaged in a collaborative activity focused on strengthening fundraising and partnership strategies to support the Beyond Ready initiative. Through small-group discussions, program leaders explored how to effectively communicate their Beyond Ready goals to potential partners and donors, and identified opportunities to expand resources supporting youth programming.

The session encouraged participants to reflect on current fundraising approaches, share strategies that have been successful within their institutions, and identify resources or support needed to strengthen their ability to mobilize both internal and external stakeholders.

Each group responded to the following questions via handout and group discussions.

Facilitators:

- Lisa Diaz, Ph.D., National 4-H Beyond Ready Director; Sr. Director, Learning Innovations in Workplace Readiness, University of Illinois
- Jennifer Skuza, Ph.D., Associate Dean and Department Head, Department of Youth Development, University of Minnesota; ECOP 4-H NC Representative

Participant Feedback: Strengthening Our Fundraising Capacity



Question 1: What is the most challenging part of creating your Beyond Ready Ask/Priority list?

University Structures and Institutional Fundraising Limitations

Many participants noted challenges related to university fundraising structures and restrictions that limit direct donor engagement.

- Limitations with contacting businesses and donors due to university fundraising structures or controlled asks by larger institutional groups.
- 1890 institutions sometimes face limitations if businesses already donate to “4-H” through an 1862 institution.
- In some 1890 systems, donated funds are placed in a general university pool rather than directly into 4-H programs.
- Difficulty identifying who 4-H is allowed to talk to when engaging donors.
- Ensuring 4-H fundraising does not compete with other university or land-grant fundraising initiatives.
- The need to help universities recognize the importance of 4-H priorities and fundraising needs.

Capacity and Staffing Constraints

Participants frequently shared that limited staffing and financial pressures make fundraising work difficult.

- Limited staff capacity while already managing existing programming responsibilities.
- Financial challenges and the difficulty of expanding work when programs are struggling to retain staff.
- Some 4-H programs lack development officers, leaving priorities identified but no staff dedicated to working the donor list.



- Institutional budget constraints limit the ability to expand fundraising efforts.

Aligning Donor Interests with Program Needs

Another common challenge was balancing donor interests with what programs actually need.

- Donors often prefer to fund scholarships or tangible projects, which can restrict how funds are used.
- Human capital and staffing needs are harder to fund, as donors often do not want to support positions.
- One-time donations are not realistic or sustainable for supporting staff positions.
- Donors want tangible outcomes, but programs can only purchase so much equipment or materials.
- Restricted funds can increase staff workload by adding additional program expectations.

Defining and Communicating the Beyond Ready Ask

Participants expressed challenges in clearly defining and communicating the Beyond Ready funding request.

- Identifying the concrete “thing” that represents Beyond Ready (such as an event or direct youth program).
- The need for simple communication tools, such as a one-page information piece.
- Knowing how to make a donor ask, especially when program leaders are not always included in donor conversations.
- Developing a tangible ask that resonates with funders.
- Communicating that 4-H is already doing the work while helping donors understand the impact.
- Building trust with funders and encouraging engagement beyond financial support.



Prioritization and Strategic Planning

Participants also noted the challenge of prioritizing program needs and aligning them with the Beyond Ready initiative.

- Creating alignment with Beyond Ready as a relatively new initiative.
- Working within existing institutional funding structures and foundations.
- Determining which program areas, specialists, or content areas should be prioritized in fundraising asks.
- The need for time to think strategically and to build a fundraising framework.
- Balancing decisions between reaching more youth versus deepening the impact of programs.
- Identifying priorities and helping boards shift focus from individual projects to long-term capacity building.

Partnerships and Collaboration

A smaller theme focused on collaboration and partnership development.

- Exploring opportunities for greater collaboration on fundraising and partnerships across programs and institutions.

Question 2: What is already working as you talk with potential or existing donors?

Relationship Building and Donor Engagement

Participants highlighted the importance of relationship-building and authentic engagement with donors.

- Having real conversations with donors to understand their passions and motivations.



- “Friendraising” and spending time building relationships before making funding requests.
- Inviting donors to participate in meetings and events such as board meetings, field days, and leadership conferences.
- Aligning 4-H programs with donor goals and interests.

Sharing Youth Stories and Demonstrating Impact

Demonstrating the real-world impact of 4-H programs was cited as an effective strategy.

- Sharing youth impact stories.
- Bringing young people into donor conversations or meetings.
- Articulating a clear statewide vision and direction for 4-H programs.

Tangible Programs and Visible Outcomes

Donors respond well when they can see clear results or concrete projects.

- Tangible programs such as scholarships, camps, or facility improvements.
- Program improvements, camp projects, and visible outcomes within Extension and 4-H programs.

Strategic Messaging and Systems

Some participants noted structural or strategic approaches that support donor outreach.

- Framing conversations around Beyond Ready.
- Using CRM systems and structured outreach for personal donor asks.
- Capital campaigns and strategic planning efforts that connect programming priorities with foundation support.
- Grant writing and donation days as additional fundraising strategies.



Maintaining Positive Engagement

Some programs have found success simply by maintaining positive communication with stakeholders.

- Work and life conversations are already happening with partners and supporters.
- Sharing positive program updates rather than always asking for funding.

Question 3: What resources or supports would be most valuable to you as a program leader in developing your Beyond Ready Fundraising Ask/Priority list?

Clear Messaging and Communication Materials

Participants strongly emphasized the need for simple and consistent messaging tools.

- One-page materials explaining Beyond Ready and the public value of 4-H.
- Rack cards or talking points can be used during everyday interactions.
- A uniform narrative or scripted presentation (such as a PowerPoint) that counties can use when speaking with local donors.
- Simple marketing materials and resource packages for donors and partners.
- A “Portrait of a 4-H’er” to illustrate program outcomes.

Training and Professional Development

Participants expressed interest in additional training and capacity-building opportunities.

- A philanthropy or fundraising boot camp for 4-H staff.
- Training on different fundraising approaches and best practices.
- Support for maintaining consistent messaging despite staff turnover.



Donor Identification and Partnership Development

Participants also want support in identifying and engaging potential donors.

- Strengthening alum connections and collaboration.
- Identifying potential donors and partnerships.
- Connecting with individuals who proactively express interest in supporting 4-H.

Strategic Planning and Fundraising Guidance

Several responses focused on tools that help programs plan and prioritize their fundraising efforts.

- Support developing a clear case statement.
- Criteria to help prioritize fundraising opportunities.
- Continued meetings with other states and leaders for strategic planning and idea sharing.
- Laying the groundwork for long-term strategies, such as endowed positions.

System Coordination and Resource Sharing

Participants emphasized the value of coordination across the 4-H system.

- Sharing resources and successful tools that already exist across states.
- Regional staff or support roles to assist states with fundraising.
- Conversations with land-grant university advancement offices to clarify how 4-H fits within broader institutional fundraising structures.

Share-Out Discussion Highlights

During the report-out discussion, several participants expanded on themes reflected in the group responses.



- Participants reiterated that prioritizing fundraising asks can be difficult, particularly when programs already have existing campaigns or fundraising priorities underway. Leaders noted the challenge of building on those existing efforts without creating competing requests.
- There was a reflection on experience working within a university fundraising environment that was previously heavily focused on athletics. It was noted that donors often have longstanding commitments to established priorities, creating what he described as “golden handcuffs” that can make it harder to shift attention toward new initiatives. His key insight was that major donors are still people first, and we need to understand their passions and what they care about, which is often the most effective way to connect them with 4-H opportunities.
- Several participants emphasized that program leaders do not always need to serve as the primary fundraising executives. Instead, their authenticity and firsthand knowledge of programs are often their greatest assets. While development teams may lead the formal ask, program leaders can play a critical role in communicating the real-world impact of the work.
- One example shared described an advancement team that invites a local 4-H representative to speak directly with development staff. This approach helps fundraisers better understand the "boots on the ground" perspective of 4-H programming and strengthens their ability to communicate program impact to donors.

Key Takeaways

Across both the written group responses and the report-out discussion, several consistent themes emerged:

- Prioritization and clarity of the ask remain ongoing challenges. Many leaders noted the difficulty of deciding which programs or initiatives to highlight, particularly when other campaigns or institutional priorities already exist.



- Institutional structures influence fundraising efforts. University advancement systems, restrictions on who can approach donors, and coordination with other fundraising initiatives all shape how 4-H programs develop their ask lists.
- Staff capacity is a major constraint. Many programs lack dedicated development officers or staff time to cultivate and manage donor relationships actively.
- Donor engagement works best when it is relational and authentic. Participants highlighted the importance of understanding donor passions, building genuine relationships, and creating opportunities for donors to see the work firsthand.
- Youth stories and tangible programs resonate strongly with donors. Scholarships, camps, and visible projects were frequently cited as examples that help donors clearly see the impact of their support.
- Program leaders play an important role in communicating impact. Even when advancement teams lead fundraising efforts, the perspective of those working directly with youth helps strengthen the case for support.
- Shared tools and training would strengthen fundraising capacity. Participants expressed interest in resources such as one-pagers, case statements, talking points, fundraising training, and examples of successful approaches from other states.